

# America's Birth Defect

*He seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence; the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger; a black mist emanated from him; a subtle and dismal influence; a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil. The circle broke up. The joy of laughter died on stiffened lips.*

— **Joseph Conrad**, *The Nigger of the*

*Narcissus*

I am not one for revisionism. If the word *nigger* appears in literature, it's there. If it appears 224 times in Huckleberry Finn, so be it. The book was published in 1884 about life in 1860, for goodness sakes. Don't pretend our past was not our past. In our Albuquerque Book Club, for a while it appeared that every third book we read was about race in America. Examples. And Charlie Palmer and I, who grew up in Houston, would tell our stories. Of course, my high school in Houston in the 1950s had no black students – a few Hispanics, and a dwarf, but no blacks. In fact, River Oaks Blvd was known as the only street in America with a Country Club at each end: River Oaks Country Club at one end, and Lamar High School at the other.

But race, I saw every day in Houston. The *Nigger Head Oysters* at the Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store shocked me. But when I came home on leave from the Naval Academy, I was back at the grocery store and found they had changed – just in that one year or so of 1960 – now they were Negro Head Oysters, with quite a different look:



Two years later, the brand was gone altogether. Probably good, right? But don't pretend it wasn't there.

On the bus I rode every time I went downtown, I noted at the end of the run, the driver would get up and slide the marker that designated colored seats in the back from white seats in the front. I was amazed at how he apparently knew how many customers of each color he would pick up on his next route.